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07 Reader's Corner
70 CPEC Updates
86 CPEC Opportunities
92 CoE Activities

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# Time to Dispel Negative Narratives of CPEC[1]

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Since the idea of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was first conceived till date, naysayers have directed quite a bit of criticism at this mammoth set of landmark projects. By the time Beijing hosted the 'Belt and Road Forum' in May 2017 much of that criticism began to implode, leaving behind a trail of far-fetched fears[2].

Despite the unflinching efforts on the part of the government, there is a plethora of disinformation spread out to sculpt and architect the people's opinion and narratives against CPEC. It is a matter of disgrace for few Pakistani naysayers who are joining the bandwagon of Indian-driven contrived misconceptions portraying CPEC as a fiction.

It is thoroughly admitted that criticism always paves the way for improvement in overall goodwill of society, which can always be taken into account. But unfortunately, our media instead of highlighting the miraculous achievement of CPEC's – energy galore and its innumerable benefits for Pakistan – has been finding and fabricating faults on the location of the routes and of different projects on the basis of "provincialism", a cold-blooded phenomenon, which emanates hate, rejection, and dejection amongst the related political segments. Simultaneously, some of them even without knowing the basics of economics have been ridiculing the total outlay of $63 billion of CPEC as a "debt-trap" – a carefully chosen term – coined by Indians which is repeatedly recited on their print, electronic and the social media to sabotage this colossal economic reality. It is no less than a pity when the spirit of nationalism is altogether overlooked by planting cleverly crooked and cooked arguments to maximize the hater amongst the people of Pakistan for vested political interests and cheap popularity. Surprisingly, Indian worries regarding CPEC seem bizarre as to why they are so concerned and feel panicky about CPEC, as they believe and propagate, that it is going to doom Pakistan's future. For this purpose, the Indians have already launched a massive media campaign on the international forum that the Chabahar seaport of Iran which is constructed with their technical and financial support will culminate the importance of Gwadar. More worrisome is that as revealed by the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC) General Zubair Mehmood Hayat in November last year that Indian RAW has established a special cell at a cost of $500 million to sabotage the CPEC[3].

**Although, it will remain a daunting task to turn people's negative perception into positives but certain facts and ground realities must constantly be highlighted, inculcated and hammered in the minds of the masses to such an extent that the purpose of propaganda campaigns are defeated and shunned there and then.**

I, being an official and unofficial proponent of CPEC, feel tormented inside-out that our print and electronic media outlets are falling prey to the nefarious designs of Indo-US alliance and other international forces by following their footprints without finding the authentic sources of information and thus help a great deal in shaping and creating a negative perception in the minds of the masses.

Although, it will remain a daunting task to turn people's negative perception into positives but certain facts and ground realities must constantly be highlighted, inculcated and hammered in the minds of the masses to such an extent that the purpose of propaganda campaigns are defeated and shunned there and then.

To start with, the most suitable and pertinent response by a renowned Indian diplomat and a Congress politician, Mani Shankar Aiyar is worth mentioning – who gave a speech at Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) in February 2018[4]. He said that an Indian Ambassador told him that: "because of the CPEC Pakistan would sink in the water. He responded to the Ambassador then what is your worry if Pakistan would sink into the water". Undoubtedly, this is the most befitting response by an Indian intellectual to an Indian propagandist. Coincidently, this can also serve as a message to our home-grown critics who have an inclination to emulate Indian critics without analysing its adverse implications on the Pakistani people who have pinned high hopes from CPEC and therefore, damaging our national narrative and pride. The worst part is that the same views are then embraced by the Indian journos who then multiply and draw far-fetched sketches against CPEC and eventually disseminate these views around the world.

On our part, it must be reiterated that CPEC is going to transform Pakistan from the small economy into a bigger economy (25th largest by 2025 only seven years later and 20th by 2030)[5]. and by no means, this hard reality could be termed as a fiction or a debt trap. Only a seasoned economist can evaluate the difference between a foreign loan and investment and its impact on Pakistan's economy. Although, the fact of the matter is that out of $63 billion an estimated amount of $48 billion is in the form of investment in the commercial projects by the Chinese companies in Pakistan which has nothing to do with the latter's external debt liability. It is only around $15 billion that will come as a loan. To offset this loan liability let's take into account just two segments of CPEC benefits which is a testimony to prove that it will actually work as a debt-reliever and not a debt trap as falsely claimed.

As per estimates of the experts, Pakistan's existing transportation network is quite dilapidated and causing a huge loss of around 3.5 per cent of the country's annual GDP. Even as per conservative estimates the total GDP is now over $300 billion mark of which 3.5 per cent loss amount worked out to be around $10 billion. Improvement in the transportation network under CPEC arrangements will substantially lower down such losses, thereby reducing the burden of external payments for oil import and for procurement of spare parts to keep the existing transportation paraphernalia in running conditions. The other item will be earning an additional income of around $6 to $8 billion per annum against the toll tax recovery. The direct and indirect impact of these two additional revenue sources alone will be

much higher, when matched with the disbursement of loan and debt service liability to China and that too in a period stretched over 25-30 years and even more[6].

We must also not overlook that Gwadar Port and its allied infrastructure would also bring a "Sea change" in the Arabian Sea. CPEC is the China-led wind-fall change that would also strongly prevail on the ground from Gwadar to Kashgar and the surrounding regions and thus far the ground is being prepared to prove that it will alter the fate of this region in the near future.

Furthermore, recommendations for connecting Chabahar with Gwadar as a "Hub Port" are equally welcomed by both the Chinese and Pakistani governments. But the fact of the matter is that on completion the maximum capacity of Chabahar would be 10-12 million tons per annum as compared to Gwadar capacity of 300-400 million tons when it will attain full capacity in a few years. India has got 212 sea-ports that can hardly handle up to 500 million tons in a year[7]. The real concern behind the hostile campaign of India against Gwadar is that in near future it would outstrip many of India's operational ports because of its much greater water depth where gigantic ships would be anchored and docked. Moreover, Gwadar port will be connected with a mammoth network of roads and other infrastructures to China, and onwards to Central Asian Republics, Africa, Middle East, and Europe. Therefore, any comparison on account of economic considerations between Gwadar and Chabahar seems unrealistic.

There is no doubt that Centre of Excellence-CPEC (CoE-CPEC), CPEC Secretariat and Development and Communication (DEVCOM) project at the Ministry of Planning, Development & Reform and some other think tanks are working tirelessly in combating this false propaganda by highlighting and providing evidence-based information that how best CPEC is going to turn around Pakistan's fragile economy with quantum leaps. They deserve real acclamations for their splendid and untiring endeavours. But as disclosed in a recent survey conducted by Pakistan China Institute (PCI) in a study to "assess the perception and awareness of respondents with regards to various impacts and challenges that Pakistan will face in its association with the CPEC...the online survey to an extent reinforces the supposition that people are not at par with the reality of CPEC."[8].

Therefore, there is a dire need to seriously review and identify the shortcomings in our policies to suggest remedial measures to rectify the misperception concerning CPEC. Media is called a "two swords" agent, the negative side of its coin can have serious and drastic implications be it CPEC or otherwise. Keeping this in mind, CPEC opponents are effectively using all the media tools especially the social media to disrupt its benefits.

The prerequisite for the best use of various media forum is then, to plan and execute effective media teams that could efficiently publicise CPEC's reality at national and international fronts by formulating a "full spectrum" strategy that may consist of following recommendations: (i) to undertake evidence-based research work on CPEC; (ii) to engage all segments of media and academia to disseminate the importance of CPEC at national level to let the masses appreciate its trickle-down effects of uplifting the living standards of the common people of Pakistan; (iii) highlight the CPEC's role at the international arena to

attract more investors to invest in Pakistan; (iv) constitute a special team to professionally handle the social media which is the major source of both negative and positive information and can change the public opinion more swiftly than electronic and other print media forums; (v) select members, leading speakers, volunteers, donors, supporters, and stakeholders to help harness the targets devised by the proposed media cells/centers; (vi) making sure that the press releases regarding CPEC activities go out in time; (vii) create and train a group of writers to craft articles for the press with a given framework as to how best the CPEC cause is highlighted and the defaming campaigns are debunked and; (viii) articulate weekly newsletters, monthly, quarterly, bi-annual and annual magazines/journals with an inclusive distribution to the relevant stakeholders, academia, students, researchers, and business community etc.

To conclude, we as a nation must not forget that China has invested at a time when Pakistan was at the most critical juncture of its history because of energy shortfalls which had adversely affected the economy coupled with multifaceted challenges of extremism and terrorism. CPEC energy projects have almost ended the decade-long chronic electricity shortfall within 32 months. Many countries have achieved the progress and prosperity when they did away with the geo-strategic policies and focussed on geo-economic realities. Pakistan has remained or either compelled to remain under the fold of geo-strategic policies by the western powers one way or the other which has never paid off. Now, thankfully, the Chinese have helped us to realize the importance of geo-economic realities through the huge influx of FDI and CPEC that will define and decide the destiny of our generations[9]. Therefore, it is our moral, social and national obligation to serve and secure CPEC with all its manifestations.

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